

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE TWO-SAIL BATEAU

By Michael Fincham

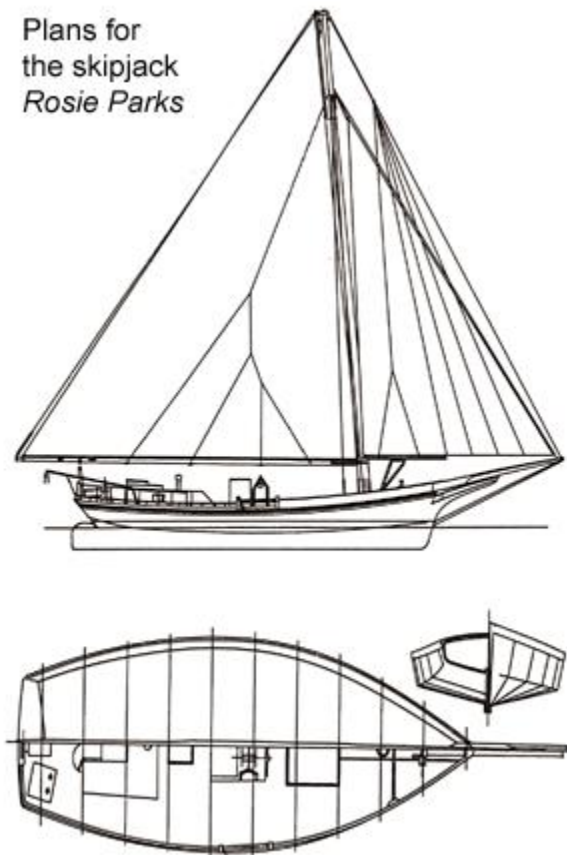
Skipjacks were born in the 1890s during the first great slump in the oyster stocks of Chesapeake Bay. They were single-masted sailing craft, so cheap to build that they soon outnumbered two-masted schooners, bugeyes and pungys, the large boats that first dredged out many of the Bay's huge oyster bars during the decades following the Civil War. Fewer oysters led to smaller boats.

For their first 50 years, skipjacks were usually called "two-sail bateaux" by the Eastern Shore watermen who built them and sailed them - but the origins of the names and the boats are still under debate. Howard I. Chapelle, a wooden boat historian who once ran a boatyard in Cambridge, Maryland interviewed numerous dredge boat captains and carpenters about the evolution of this commercial sailing craft. They used "skipjack" to describe a sail rig and "bateau" to describe a hull design.

The two-sail bateau, he concluded, echoed elements of earlier flat-bottomed boats like the "sharpie" from Long Island Sound and the Hampton "flattie," a crabbing skiff from the lower Chesapeake Bay. For their oystering bateau, tidewater boatbuilders designed a V bottom with planking and a straight deadrise slanting up to a hard chine. They also gave their boat a shallow draft so it could go dredging in shoal waters for oysters that bigger boats couldn't reach.

According to one formula, a skipjack sail rig usually featured a bowsprit as long as the boat was wide, a boom as long as the deck, and a raked mast as tall as the boat length and beam added together. The two-sail design included a jib foresail and a large, loose-footed, "leg of mutton"

Plans for
the skipjack
Rosie Parks



John Lord, courtesy Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

mainsail. All that canvas gave skipjacks the power to pull dredges in light winds that left larger boats becalmed.

So where did the names "bateau" and "skipjack" come from? Chapelle's guess was that "bateau" was a term brought to the Eastern Shore by French Huguenots, Protestant exiles who settled in Dorchester and Somerset counties in the late 1600s to escape persecution back home by the Catholic forces of Louis XIV. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "bateau" was in use by the 1800s as an American term for a French Canadian flat-bottomed river boat - a style that may have been adapted for Chesapeake Bay crabbing skiffs.

And "skipjack"? In 1901 a *Baltimore Sun* reporter guessed that the new fast-sailing "skipjacks" may have been named after the bonita, a fast-swimming fish found in the ocean, not the Bay. A better guess would have been the skipjack tuna, a fish often found feeding near bonita. Another guess by another historian: "skipjack" is an archaic English word meaning "inexpensive but useful servant." Take your pick.

The birthplace of these two-sail bateaux may have been a boatyard near Crisfield, but they were soon being hammered together in boatyards and backyards all along the lower Eastern Shore from Tilghman Island, Maryland down to Pungoteague Creek, Virginia. The greatest number of boats came out of the towns and villages down along the Deal Island peninsula of Maryland. A few came out of the Western Shore of Virginia. Perhaps 700 hundred two-sail bateaux were built in all, most of them between 1891 and 1916.

The decade after World War II, however, brought a bustle of new bateau construction, beginning with the *Helen Virginia* (1948) built in Crisfield, Maryland and the *City of Crisfield* (1949) built in Reedville, Virginia. Other boats begun in Virginia included the *Somerset* (1949), the *Caleb W. Jones* (1953) and the *H.M. Krentz* (1955). And in a backyard in Wingate, Maryland, boatbuilder Bronza Parks turned out his last three bateaux: the *Rosie Parks* (1955), the *Martha Lewis* (1955) and the *Lady Katie* (1956). When he finished each one, he had it hauled down the road by cart for a riverside launching. Bronza Parks died in 1958, ending this last Indian Summer of Eastern Shore skipjack building.

Last winter, during the worst oyster season on record, just eight of these boats went dredging for oysters. They motored out for two "push days" a week, the only days they could haul out enough oysters to pay a crew. These graceful, historic sailing bateaux with their clipper-like bowsprits, leaning masts and long booms had become motor-driven platforms for power dredging. Not one of them ever raised a sail. One carried no sail for its mast. One carried no mast.